

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122628172105412477>

BOOKS

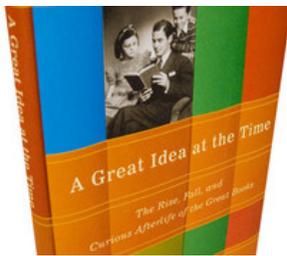
Learning for Everyone

By *Robert K. Landers*

Updated Nov. 10, 2008 12:01 a.m. ET

Alex Beam, a columnist for the Boston Globe, set out to write a book that wasn't great -- and, *mirabile dictu*, he has succeeded. He wanted his informal history of the Great Books movement in America, "A Great Idea at the Time," to be "brief, engaging, and undidactic . . . as different from the ponderous and forbidding Great Books as it could possibly be" -- and so it is.

By "Great Books," Mr. Beam here means the Encyclopedia Britannica's "Great Books of the Western World," that imposing mid-20th-century set of 54 volumes by 76 authors, from Homer to Freud, not to mention contributions from the collection's impresarios, Robert Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler. Included in the set was Adler's *Syntopicon*, an unwieldy two-volume index to the 102 Great Ideas (from Angel to World) in the Great Books, complete with dry essays by Adler on each Great Idea.



Mr. Beam pokes fun at this whole pompous venture, terming Britannica's Great Books "icons of unreadability -- 32,000 pages of tiny, double-column, eye-straining type." But critic Dwight Macdonald was there long before him. In a memorable *New Yorker* essay titled "The Book-of-the-Millennium Club," he wittily demolished the pretensions of the enterprise when it was launched in 1952. Even had the selection and presentation of the Great Books been ideal, Macdonald noted, it

hardly would make sense for readers to spend \$250 -- the equivalent of more than \$2,000 today -- for the set, since most of the books "can be had in inexpensive reprints."

But adman extraordinaire William Benton, who, along with the University of Chicago, owned Encyclopedia Britannica, was more intent on selling the Great Books than on getting people to read them. "The thought of reading them would terrify [some] potential buyers," he observed. The *Syntopicon*, with 163,000 page references, was intended to let people extract what the Great Books say about the Great Ideas (and lesser "topics") without their having to really read the books. But the index, which failed to distinguish between major and minor references, proved virtually unusable.

Undaunted by the disappointing sales of only 2,000 sets in the first two years, Benton hired a veteran encyclopedia salesman whose hard-sell approach and relentless sales force turned the Great Books into a resounding commercial success. By 1960, 35,000 sets a year were being sold, and the next year sales peaked at more than 50,000.

Macdonald, something of a snob and a passionate foe of all things middlebrow, had no use at all for the Great Books project. Mr. Beam, for all his irreverence, is not so dismissive. To Macdonald, the set's first volume, an 82-page introductory essay by Hutchins, the former "boy wonder" president of the University of Chicago, was merely "a sort of after-dinner speech." But to Mr. Beam, Hutchins's essay is "a beautiful, eloquent, at times humorous, and brief defense of the Western tradition told with Hutchins's trademark wit and conciseness."

And while most of the million sets of the Great Books that finally were sold may have served merely as "colorful furniture" (in Hutchins's sardonic phrase), Mr. Beam notes that "thousands of copies, perhaps tens of thousands, were actually read, and had an enormous impact on the

lives of the men, women, and children who read them." Earlier versions of the Great Books concept, less ponderous and expensive, may eventually have reached even more readers.

The Great Books craze began in the early 1940s in Chicago, expanding from Hutchins's university to an evening seminar in the Loop for the city's movers and shakers. It then caught on with other intellectually (or socially) hungry adults in the city and state -- 5,000 by 1946 -- and spread to Cleveland and other Midwestern cities. In 1947, Hutchins and Adler launched the Great Books Foundation, which, using low-cost paperbacks of the classics, spread the gospel outside the Midwest.

Four years later, Mr. Beam reports, there were 2,500 Great Books discussion groups, with roughly 25,000 members meeting "all over the country, in public libraries, in church basements, chamber of commerce offices, corporate conference rooms at IBM and Grumman Aircraft, in private homes, on army bases, and, yes, in prisons." By 1961, when the marketing push for Britannica's "Great Books of the Western World" was in high gear, about 47,000 Americans were enrolled in Great Books discussion groups.

Sales of Britannica's Great Books "sputtered in the late 1960s, flatlined in the 1970s, and later fell off the cliff," Mr. Beam relates. Interest in discussing the Great Books also flagged. The Great Books Foundation still exists -- claiming 850 discussion groups -- but "hardly any of them," Mr. Beam says, read the books on the Hutchins-Adler list.

Given what has happened to the study of the humanities in the past two decades -- with theory and politics playing a larger role and fewer people reading the traditional canon -- it is hard not to feel a bit nostalgic for Great Books earnestness. In academe, there is only what might be regarded as a saving remnant: "Among major universities, only Columbia, where the whole idea began" -- around the time of World War I, long before the mania erupted in Chicago -- "still force-feeds a much-abbreviated version of the Great Books curriculum to its undergraduates," Mr. Beam notes. "Tiny St. John's College, created by disciples of Hutchins and Adler, still devotes all four years to teaching the Great Books, as Hutchins vainly hoped the University of Chicago would do."

Molly Rothenberg, a student at St. John's in Annapolis, Md., told Mr. Beam of comparing notes when she was a sophomore with a fellow graduate of the public high school in Cambridge, Mass. St. John's sophomores study works by such authors as Aristotle, Tacitus and Shakespeare. Her friend was attending Bates College in Maine. "She told me they were studying Rhetoric," Ms. Rothenberg said, "and they would be watching episodes of 'Desperate Housewives' and listening to Eminem. They were going to analyze it. I just laughed. What could I say?"

Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell" (Encounter).